

The Bible And Patriotism

By
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June 30, 2024

“Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.”

-1 Corinthians 10:31-33

As a pastor, one of the things that I have tried to emphasize is the importance of holidays. I firmly believe that these days give us the opportunity to celebrate with friends and family, thus strengthening our communal bonds and giving occasion for joy. And, in the case of days like Easter and Christmas, they give us special opportunities to focus on Biblical truths; and on days like Mother’s day and Father’s day, we can focus on generally good and edifying things. With the Fourth of July coming up I thought it would be good to talk about how Christians can glorify God by celebrating this particular day and those like it, such as Veteran’s Day or Memorial Day.

This can be a point of controversy for some Christians. Because our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20) some would argue that patriotic celebrations are not really important, or even that they could be bad and give birth to dangerous ideologies such as Christian nationalism. While others will argue that America is a Christian nation and so celebrating our national heritage is good, and even a Christian activity. While I don’t fully subscribe to the latter idea, I will argue in this paper that patriotism in itself is a virtuous and noble thing, and then I will highlight the unique elements of America’s founding that are particularly godly and worth celebrating as well as worth fighting to preserve.

Is Patriotism Good?

“By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down, yea, we wept When we remembered Zion. We hung our harps Upon the willows in the midst of it. For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song, And those who plundered us requested mirth, Saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How shall we sing the LORD’s song In a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, Let my right hand forget its skill! If I do not remember you, Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth— If I do not exalt Jerusalem Above my chief joy.”

-Psalm 137:1-6

In the above Psalm, the author is writing during a time of exile from the land of Israel. As you can see, this author is writing about a specific love for the land of Israel and not necessarily about a love for the temple mount or any purely religious monument within Israel. So while this Psalm is sad in nature, it is also ultimately a patriotic cry for the nation of Israel preserved for us in the text of Scripture. What this should tell us, at the very least, is that patriotism for a particular nation is not necessarily a bad thing, and I will argue here, that it is actually a good and necessary thing even if our loyalty is not for a specifically godly nation or heritage.

The Example of the Rechabites

“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: ‘Go and tell the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, “Will you not receive instruction to obey My words?” says the LORD. “The words of Jonadab the son of Rechab, which he commanded his sons, not to drink wine, are performed; for to this day they drink none, and obey their father’s commandment. But although I have spoken to you, rising early and speaking, you did not obey Me.”

-Jeremiah 35:13-14

This might be one of the most odd passages in the entire Bible. The book of Jeremiah is a prophetic book in which the prophet Jeremiah cries out against the ungodliness within the land of Israel and exhorts them to repent before God judges the land through the Babylonians. In this chapter, Jeremiah takes a really strange detour and is told by God to visit with a strange nomadic tribe called the Rechabites. Upon his visit, God commands Jeremiah to offer them wine, which they refuse due to a vow that their forefather had made to not drink wine or plant any fields, but instead remain nomadic. It is upon this explanation that God praises the Rechabites for their loyalty to their forefather. Notice that God’s praise isn’t for the specific things that the Rechabites are being faithful to, but instead their virtuous habit of loyalty to their forefather; even though his vow was not specifically in-keeping with any particular divine command.

He then uses the example of the Rechabites to denounce the rest of the nation. He says that if the Rechabites could show loyalty to the command of an earthly patriarch, then certainly the nation could show loyalty to Him. In this story I believe we get a very clear picture as to the goodness of loyalty and its value even in intermediate contexts like loyalty to family or nation.

“No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.”

-1 John 4:12

Since God is Spirit and His full presence is hidden from us while we are on this earth, it is impossible for anyone to naturally love God directly. Instead, what God has designed for us are intermediate access points of love and goodness that prepare us to love Him. This is why, even though the relationship between God, the Creator, and us, the created, is different than any particular relationship, He uses various metaphors to help us understand our relationship with Him. So God reveals Himself as our heavenly Father, our Spouse, our King, our Judge, our Shepherd, and so on. What this tells us is that when a person experiences love and loyalty for these intermediate things, they are being made ready to relate to God on all the levels that He desires for us to relate to Him on. As I learn to love my country and to be a loyal citizen, I become ready to love the kingdom of heaven and to serve God as my King, as I learn to be a faithful son, I learn to love God as my Father, and so on.

“If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.”

-Luke 14:26

Some will argue that the above passage contradicts the point that I just made. That Jesus is saying that we must be ultimately loyal to Him, and this negates the loyalty that we express towards our families or our nation. What Jesus is actually expressing is the importance of making our love for Him supreme, not that loving Jesus supremely negates the other loves in our life. Since none of these relationships are with God Himself, they are never supposed to be treated with the same level of loyalty or devotion that is due to God alone, (more on that point later), however, it remains true that if I don't learn loyalty and love for my family, my community, and my nation first, then I won't be able to adequately love God in these particular ways. As I mentioned in my papers about Father's Day and Mother's day, if some of these relationships were denied to you through no fault of your own, this doesn't cut you off permanently from loving God in these ways. But it will nevertheless be an obstacle to your love for God, and until you can relearn what these loves are meant to look like, in an earthly sense, it will be almost impossible for you to love God in these specific ways in a heavenly sense.

This is why the New Testament authors rejected the Gnostic arguments that divine love replaces earthly love, and therefore any earthly loyalty was unnecessary. The apostles contradict this sentiment in numerous places by encouraging honor for parents (Ephesians 6:2-3), honor for government (Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:13-17), and honor for masters (1 Peter 2:18-25, Ephesians 6:5-9). Loyalty to God doesn't replace earthly

love, it hallows it. By loving God supremely, we are now made ready to love our families and nations correctly. Not in the idolatrous fashions of the pagans, but instead in a God glorifying manner as God directs.

Men Without Chests

But unfortunately, this Gnostic idea has come back into fashion. Many today, Christian and otherwise, warn obtusely about the dangers of “tribalism” and proclaim the moral superiority of those who have no immediate loyalty to nation or family, but instead have a loyalty to abstract concepts like “love”, “justice”, and “truth”. But since these abstract concepts are not taught to us in a vacuum, but instead through these intermediate sources, a culture that mocks patriotism and familial love is a culture that will be devoid of these things altogether. It is this future culture that Paul predicts in 2 Timothy 3:

“But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!”

-2 Timothy 3:1-5

The apostle Paul predicts that a disloyal and narcissistic culture will emerge in “the last days” and bring ruin to all those around them. Part of this future culture is that they will be “disobedient to parents” and “traitors”. It is this type of culture that C.S. Lewis believed was emerging in the west in his book “The Abolition of Man”. He said that the modern globalist perspective that criticized the natural love of family and country was bringing about a terrible culture filled with “men without chests”. That is, people who are all intellect and no conviction. These are people who naively believe that abstract virtues are possible without any training in the intermediate relations that ground these virtues and make them possible to be practiced.

“And all the time — such is the tragi-comedy of our situation — we continue to clamour for those very qualities we are rendering impossible. You can hardly open a periodical without coming across the statement that what our civilization needs is more ‘drive’, or dynamism, or self-sacrifice, or ‘creativity’. In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful.”

-C. S. Lewis - “The Abolition of Man”

It is this type of thinking that has led to the most brutal and sadistic revolutions of the past couple centuries. Both with the global Utopian visions of the Marxists that led to the Communist revolutions of the 20th century and the French Revolution of the 18th century. But also the Fascistic backlash that brought about the Axis Powers of World War 2. In which men like Mussolini and Hitler rose to power and prominence on the platform of reinvigorating national pride and familial affection. Right as the French Revolution began, an Christian English politician named Edmund Burke warned of this brutal outcome in his famous letter, "Reflections On The Revolution In France".

"One of the first symptoms they discover of a selfish and mischievous ambition, is a profligate disregard of a dignity which they partake with others. To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country and to mankind. The interests of that portion of social arrangement is a trust in the hands of all those who compose it; and as none but bad men would justify it in abuse, none but traitors would barter it away for their own personal advantage."

-Edmund Burke - Reflections On The Revolution In France

As Christians, we should be wary of criticisms of patriotism and familial love. These things are not just good in an abstract sense, but they are essential to the true practice of Godliness and virtue in our day to day lives. It is no mistake that as patriotism diminishes, (the 2022 Gallup poll shows record lows) family and faith in our culture are also diminishing at a commensurate rate.

The Danger Of Tribalism

"...for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal?"

-1 Corinthians 3:3-4

However, as I alluded before, this does not make patriotism an inherent good. While it has many good benefits, like all other good things, if God is not supreme, then even the best things can be turned to evil. Love for one's family is a beautiful thing, but when it becomes an ultimate thing, then you can fall into the ancestor worship of the Pagans. You can start to believe that your family is above reproach and even defend wicked behaviors of family members in the name of loyalty. In the same way, love for one's nation is a good thing, but when patriotism goes far, then it moves us to negative forms of nationalism.

This is where modern people get confused when we use terms like “Christian nationalism”. In reality, this phrase is an oxymoron. To be a Christian means that you have placed Christ first within your heart and nothing else takes that place at the center of your identity or personal priorities. To be a “nationalist”, in the pejorative sense, is more likened to being a “racist”. A racist is not simply someone who is proud of their ancestry or their race, but someone who centers their identity around their race. This moves them to believe that their race is inherently superior to all other races. A nationalist does the same thing, only in regards to their nation as opposed to their race.

So a nationalist is not just someone who has national pride, but someone who centers their identity around their national identity. They believe that their nation is not just “good” but supreme. Since a Christian’s identity is fundamentally rooted in our relationship with God, it is actually a sin for a Christian to orient their identity around their nationality, race, or family. When the Nazi party was on the rise in Germany, promoting both national supremacy as well as racial supremacy, the true German pastors rose up in opposition to the Nazi’s on this very basis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer being at the forefront of this movement.

When the Nazi’s implemented the so-called “Aryan paragraph” that forced German churches to enforce some of their anti-jewish practices within the church, Bonhoeffer and many other pastors refused. In his paper “The Church and the Jewish Question” Bonhoeffer contends that it is his specific Christian identity that makes him a true patriot to the nation of Germany. But since his loyalty to Christ was superior, his vision for the country that he loved was tied to his moral convictions towards God and could never contradict his devotion to God.

This means that Bonhoeffer did not see questioning the state to be opposed to his patriotism, but instead, he saw it as a result of his patriotism. This is why he calls the church the “most faithful servant” of the state. He believed that because Christians were free from negative tribalistic practices, they could objectively assess the behaviors of the state, and withstand them when necessary. And since God’s law is supreme and true, a church that encourages the state towards a Biblical vision of governance could save the state from itself.

“When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.”

-Matthew 25:31-32

So while a Christian should be on guard against nationalism, the answer to nationalism is not a lack of patriotism, but a supreme devotion to God. In our current cultural moment, it seems like Christians are being encouraged to be either less religious, or less political. But a Christian who is truly devout towards God, and socially conscious is accused of being a “Christian Nationalist”, which just isn’t true. A devout Christian must embody the true virtue of patriotism, in proper submission to their devotion to God. And this devotion ought to make the believer committed to pursuing the peace of the land that they dwell (Jeremiah 29:7) which has both gospel implications as well as societal ones. The Christian who balances these qualities well can actually enrich their status as a citizen of heaven, by being a true patriot of the nation that they dwell.

Is America A Christian Nation?

Now that we have defended patriotism in general, it is important to ask if there is anything particularly special about the United States that would make our heritage “godly”. While there has been much debate about this, the majority of the discussion is about the particular religious practices of our founding fathers, but I think this is not a very useful place to go. My argument is not that the founding fathers were particularly devout Christians, (truthfully they were a bit of a mixed bag ranging from Christian deists to devout Christians.) Instead I want to argue that our governmental system was developed out of a uniquely Christian philosophy and world view, and I will point out three specific elements of our government that shows this. First, the presumption of universal human rights, second the assumed fallen nature of man, and third the expressed goal of personal liberty.

Before I dive into each of these points I want to differentiate my arguments from a relatively popular perspective that is going around in the church right now, and that is the belief that America is a Christian nation in the sense that Israel was a Jewish nation. To the point that these Christians actually appropriate prophetic passages about Israel, as being equally applicable to America. While I believe this perspective is well meaning, and not heretical, it is also demonstrably not true. When God founded the nation of Israel, He did so through incredible miraculous intervention, like the plagues of Egypt, the Red Sea Crossing, and the giving of Manna. While I believe that the story of the American founding is amazing, it is certainly not miraculous in this sense. God did not plague the British, or rain down bread from heaven to feed the American troops. One could argue that some events in the Revolutionary War were fairly providential, but this isn’t the same thing.

Also, God actually wrote down the ten commandments with His own finger, and dictated to Moses the rest of the Law that would govern the nation of Israel. This is not the same

as the founding fathers being immersed in a Biblically literate culture and crafting their laws in response to the principles that they found in Scripture. Also, Israel is specifically named in prophecies of the Bible, America is not. Some believe that we ought to be in the Bible because of our current global prominence, but when you study the end times prophecies that are contained in books like Daniel and Revelation, you see that the biblical authors use contemporary empires to symbolize future ones. So, in the sense that we are the current global hegemonic power, you could relate our current status to prophecies about Babylon or Rome. However, we are not mentioned specifically in the Bible the way that Israel is. None of this should detract from the fact that America is special in world history and we really do have a genuinely godly heritage that is worth preserving.

Universal Human Rights

“Whoever sheds man’s blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.”

-Genesis 9:6

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. —That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, —That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

-The Declaration of Independence

One of the most unique elements of the Bible is its contention that all of mankind are made in “the image of God.” Without getting too deep into the theological implications of this statement, the practical implication mentioned in Genesis 9 is that since all mankind bears the image of God, then all of mankind carries a certain inherent value that can’t be violated by other human beings, no matter how powerful. In the ancient pagan world, this language of “image of god” was used, but only towards the monarch. The monarch was always said to be a son of god or made in the image of god, but the common people were not given that designation. This meant that the powerful didn’t owe anything in particular to their people, they could marry who they wanted, they could enslave who they wanted, and they could conquer who they wanted without any qualms or arguments. It is only the Jewish Scriptures that give all of humanity equal rights and value before God, regardless of their social or political status.

“My brethren, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality. For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes, and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, “You sit here in a good place,” and say to the poor man, “You stand there,” or, “Sit here at my footstool,” have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?”

-James 2:1-5

This may seem obvious to us today, but a statement like the one we find in James would be unheard of in the ancient world. The concept that partiality is actually a bad thing, and that all people have inherent value flew in the face of ancient morality, which is why it took so long for the implications of this to permeate Christian societies. It literally took centuries for Christians to really work out what passages like this meant, and it was only then that they started to oppose the institution of slavery, formed Just War Theory, and denied the so-called “Divine Right of Kings”. All of these innovations cut heavily against the previous pagan societies, and were widely opposed by the people of the time. Christians were persecuted and even killed for having such beliefs, but over the centuries, slowly these views became mainstream.

When our country was founded, these ideas had finally reached their fruition and were being implemented in England. So when the Declaration of Independence was written, Thomas Jefferson could write boldly that the reality of universal human value was “self-evident” and therefore no king or government body had the “right” to remove the value of other human beings. Therefore, our founders considered it their civic, and religious, duty to oppose tyranny towards the image bearers of God almighty. This truth was written into all the founding documents of our nation, and has a clear Christian lineage, regardless if the men who penned these words had a relationship with the God from whom this idea derives its foundation.

Oppression in America

Even though this should be a point of pride for the believer, many today are going out of their way to oppose this historic truth. They claim that universal human value is actually a product of secular humanism and that religion, especially Christianity, is a force of oppression. They further argue that America was actually founded as a racist country that didn’t actually believe in innate human worth. There are many mainstream attempts to promote this view of American history that have been going on for decades, I think the most prominent one though was the “1619 Project”. This “project” began in 2019

and was headed by numerous journalists and historians who essentially argued that America's true founding was not 1776 at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, but instead in 1619 when the first black slaves were brought over:

"In August of 1619, a ship appeared on this horizon, near Point Comfort, a coastal port in the English colony of Virginia. It carried more than 20 enslaved Africans, who were sold to the colonists. No aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the years of slavery that followed. On the 400th anniversary of this fateful moment, it is finally time to tell our story truthfully."

-The 1619 Project

This is a flat denial of what Thomas Jefferson wrote. This project sought to explain that the founding fathers were really hypocrites who even fought the revolution to avoid the emancipation movement that began in England. According to this theory, the true legacy of America was not Christian values that promote innate human worth, but instead cynical, hypocritical promises that had to be overturned by the efforts of the oppressed. This is how one of the founders of the "1619 Project" put it:

"Our democracy's founding ideals were false when they were written. Black Americans have fought to make them true."

-Nicole Hannah Jones

While it is undeniably true that racial oppression is a part of American history, the question remains, were the acts of racial oppression of our past our true legacy and the statements in our founding document the hypocrisy, or are the statements our legacy and the actions the hypocrisy? American history is a sordid one, and anyone trying to whitewash it, or demonize it is doing a disservice to others. The fact of the matter is that racism, oppression, and slavery are universal human sins, and stains on the history of every society. They are clear evidence of man's fallen nature and our need for a savior, but they are in no way unique to America or our history. The unique thing about American history is that we are the only nation to fight a horrific war to end slavery, and we did this within a century of our founding. We are also one of the few nations that carries shame about the oppressive acts of our past. Like I said, all other nations carry this guilt, but we are uniquely publicly ashamed of what we have done.

Facts like this, and many like it, are why most of the prominent African American activists were stalwart patriots and did consider the actions of America to be hypocritical and not the promises of America. Their contention was not that the system had to be undermined, but instead that America had to live up to the promise made to all of its citizens at its founding. Take just two quotes for an example, one from Fredrick Douglas, the other from Martin Luther King Jr.

“Fellow Citizens, I am not wanting in respect for the fathers of this republic. The signers of the Declaration of Independence were brave men. They were great men, too, great enough to give frame to a great age. It does not often happen to a nation to raise, at one time, such a number of truly great men. The point from which I am compelled to view them is not, certainly, the most favorable; and yet I cannot contemplate their great deeds with less than admiration. They were statesmen, patriots and heroes, and for the good they did, and the principles they contended for, I will unite with you to honor their memory... Fellow-citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here to-day? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? And am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us?”

-Fredrick Douglas - “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”

“One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, and thus carrying our whole nation back to great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.”

-Martin Luther King Jr. - “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

The fact of the matter is that the belief in universal human dignity is a uniquely Judeo-Christian one. No other worldview has produced anything quite like it and the more we consider that idea to be at the roots of our society, the more we can reform our society to bring forth the fruit of that divine teaching. The more that this reality is undermined, the more we will see race relationships heating up. Racism is only pacified in the teachings of Christ that declare all of us children of the Most High and worthy of dignity and liberty. These roots brought America through the racism of our past into a time that had more racial diversity and passivity than any other nation on earth.

As ideas like “Critical Race Theory” and the “1619 Project” have gained more prominence in our culture racial tensions have increased because these ideologies are expressly non-Christian. For those who say that we need to get religion out of politics, I don’t believe that they have really thought this idea through. Anyone who wants to keep the fruit of Christian ideals while also destroying Christianity as a part of our founding is a little like someone sawing at the branch that they are sitting on. The only way to preserve this ideal, is to give honor to its source.

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

-Galatians 3:28

Presumed Human Falleness

“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned—”

-Romans 5:12

“But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary.”

--James Madison - “The Federalist Papers” Number 51

The other unique thing about Biblical teaching is that mankind is inherently fallen. In most cultures, human beings are thought to be incomplete, but the belief is that people can be made “right” if they are taught the right values and raised in the correct manner. In other words, most human societies believe that people can be made right through human institutions and human will. The Bible teaches otherwise. It tells us that a fundamental part of our nature is our fallen nature. This doesn't mean that people are only evil, but since we are made in God's image, yet fallen, we are capable of both good and evil, with tendencies towards both.

Even for the Christian, although we have the right teachings and we are endeavoring to live in the right ways, the Bible still contends that we are fallen and pulled by our flesh, (our old sinful nature).

“For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.”

-Galatians 5:17

Corrupting Power

This doesn't mean that we can't make progress in our sanctification, only that the pull of our corruption is alive and well, even for the most righteous individuals. Therefore, it is good for any system to take that into account and seek to mitigate the corrupting influence of the flesh, especially in regards to unchecked power. However, since most worldviews don't consider mankind to be inherently corrupt, they tend to localize power where they think it is the most safe, and remove safeguards to maximize efficiency. For most systems, power is localized at the very top in the form of a king or emperor, but in

other systems it is localized amongst the elite in a form of an oligarchy, and in other forms it is localized with the people in the form of a democracy.

However, once power crystallizes in any form, the tendency of man is to utilize power to furnish our own aims at the cost of others. It is also the tendency of the flesh to become more corrupted by the power granted to us. This is why when the Israelites entered into the land, God did not give them a monarchy, an oligarchy, or a democracy. The system that He gave them was actually a form of confederacy in which each tribe governed their own affairs with a separated form of governance amongst the Levites, acting as the religious power in the land, and the political power resting in the tribal elders. There was also a contingency for a ruler to emerge in times of war in the form of the judges, but the judges were not meant to be a permanent office, only a temporary one for dealing with emergencies.

This all changed though when Israel dealt with a major crisis in the beginning of the book of Samuel and finally demanded that God appoint for them a king. But notice how God answers them through the prophet Samuel:

“And he said, “This will be the behavior of the king who will reign over you: He will take your sons and appoint them for his own chariots and to be his horsemen, and some will run before his chariots. “He will appoint captains over his thousands and captains over his fifties, will set some to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and some to make his weapons of war and equipment for his chariots...”

-1 Samuel 8:11-12

This kind of statement is unheard of in the ancient world. Power centers were seen as the manifestation of divine authority on this earth, and therefore, they were seen as an inherent good. Only in the Bible do we see the view of human depravity that can be accelerated by power, and therefore God always discourages any form of governance that localizes too much power in one institution.

Dividing Power

It is upon these truths that the American system of government was crafted. The first form of government attempted by the founding fathers was a confederacy, but once this was seen as untenable, a representative democracy was developed and instituted. Once the founding fathers wrote the Constitution, three of them wrote a series of essays explaining and defending the system of government that they chose. These essays are called “The Federalist Papers”. Arguably the most famous and rich one of these essays was the 51st one written by James Madison. In it, he says this about our system of government:

“Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions.”

-James Madison - “The Federalist Papers” Number 51

Every aspect of our system was developed to mitigate against human nature itself. Some people complain about elements of our system, that it is inefficient and that in having constant elections it is slow and run by those who spend the majority of their time campaigning. What they fail to see is that these aren't bugs in the system, they are intentional features placed there by men who were deeply concerned about the corrupting influence of human nature itself. Our system isn't really designed to put power in the right hands, since those hands don't really exist. Instead it is a system of incentive structures designed to coerce even the worst people into doing the right thing.

Each aspect of our system is power checking power. The states checking the power of the federal government, congress checking the president, the courts checking congress, the many being checked by the few, the political authorities being checked by the religious authorities, and so on. Our government is intentionally a mixture of a monarchy, an oligarchy, and a democracy for this exact reason, the founders did not want any aspect of our society to have too much localized power, they wanted power to be checked at every conceivable level.

Really quickly, I will take the two that most Christians have issue with before moving on to the next point, capitalism, and the separation of church and state.

Capitalism

“For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”

-1 Timothy 6:10

It would be easy for a Christian today to believe that capitalism is against the gospel since it promotes a “love for money” and makes it so that people can become astronomically wealthy while others are left impoverished. They can be deceived into thinking that a better system would be a more equal one, in which money is distributed according to need, so that none would go hungry, and the wealthy could pay their fair share in our society. While this utopian vision sounds nice, it fails to take into account what the founders were worried about. It’s not that they didn’t think that this vision would be good, it’s that if you give the political centers the power to redistribute wealth, you have made them too powerful, and you have guaranteed corruption and incompetence.

So first, for the founders, it was a good thing to make sure that another form of power, capital, could be generated and held by private individuals. Since the government did not hold the capital of the society, like in feudalism or socialism, this prevented them from being too powerful and it allowed for private interests to check political ones, especially since it costs so much for politicians to run election campaigns. However, the government can also tax companies and wealthy individuals, and break up companies from becoming too powerful through antitrust laws. This allows for political power to check the economic power as well. While there are clear excesses within this system that can be rightly pointed out, it still remains a very stalwart method of mitigating against power pooling within one location of our country.

Also, Jesus told His followers:

“The poor you will always have with you...”

-Matthew 26:11

While it is true that many people experience poverty because they are born into unfair situations, or they really were taken advantage of by others. It is also true that many are poor because they struggle with mental illness and vices like sloth, low self-control, and addiction. In the latter cases, more money would not solve the problems of the poor, they would only exacerbate them.

“For three things the earth is perturbed, Yes, for four it cannot bear up: For a servant when he reigns, A fool when he is filled with food...”

Proverbs 30:21-22

If someone is given to vice and doesn’t not have respect for money since they did not earn it, they will be made worse off by receiving it. Also, since the political structure doesn’t generate the money that they would be redistributing, they also don’t respect the money they are given, and will often mismanage it. This is why many of these

welfare systems are wildly mismanaged, they become over bloated, and have not actually solved any of the problems that they have set out to solve; and I believe that strong arguments could be made that they have made things worse. By promoting merit, capitalism doesn't solve the problem of human greed, but it does mitigate it, and even aim it towards societal good. Again, not a perfect system, but our founders knew that perfect systems do not exist, since they will always be run by fallen people and be over fallen people.

Separation of Church and State

“And Jesus answered and said to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” And they marveled at Him.”

-Mark 12:17

This is a very complicated topic that deserves a much longer explanation, but for the sake of this paper I will do my best to condense this issue. To start off, I actually don't like the particular phrase “separation of church and state” because it implies that the church and state are meant to be completely disconnected and this has led to the modern belief that one can exist without the other. This is why the state has become more secular and the church has become less political. I prefer the phrase “distinction of church and state” because it more fairly represents what Jesus is alluding to in this famous passage.

The church and state represent different facets of a given society, but they are not fully separable. When Jesus makes this statement, He is certainly not saying that one is separable from the other, only that in the New Covenant, these are fully distinct entities. In the Old Covenant, they had much more overlap since the Old Covenant created a nation-state, while the New Covenant did not. The church is not a political entity and therefore does not belong to a particular nation like the Jews belong to Israel. However, this doesn't mean that Jesus meant for the church to be separated from their given communities. When He says to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's” He is directly telling His followers that they are under the authority and purview of the state. As such, they have obligations to the state and must respect the authority that God has given the civil authorities.

So what is the purpose of the civil authorities? To produce justice.

“For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.”

-Romans 13:4

The state is given the power of the sword by God to make laws that promote justice and to enforce those laws to protect their citizens. This is a sentiment echoed by the founding fathers.

“Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society. It ever has been and ever will be pursued until it be obtained, or until liberty be lost in the pursuit.”

-James Madison - “The Federalist Papers” Number 51

So what does the church do?

“I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”

-1 Timothy 3:15

The church exists in a society as the “pillar and ground of the truth”. This means that we have access to the divine law of God through the Scriptures, and through this knowledge we are able to act as the soul of a society. We possess divine instruction on what moral structure is actually pleasing to God and therefore we can guide the conscience of our society to become more Godly. This doesn't mean that the Christian church will occupy this role in a given society. Many societies today do not have the church as the soul of their given society, and Christians can still honor God in societies like this, albeit with greater difficulty. However, the church should want to occupy this role since it gives us the ability to shine forth the truth of the divine law, through human laws.

“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

-Romans 12:2

The moral strictures of Christianity are good for all men, not just believers. As spoken before, it is a good thing that Christians fought to abolish slavery, even though every society of man had universally practiced this vile institution from time immemorial. Now, even the most ardent atheist admits that this was a net good for human society, even though their worldview doesn't have a basis for why this would be good. This “proves” the “good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” Even to the person who does not know God.

This is why the first amendment of the Constitution prevents the federal government from instituting a state church. This doesn't mean, as some have falsely claimed, that

the founders didn't want religion to interact with politics, but it does mean that the government can't create "The Church of America", in the way that the Anglican church is "The Church of England". Once again, this was to prevent too much power from pooling in a singular location. But they all recognized that the church had a very important role within the body politic:

"Because We have no Government armed with Power capable of contending with human Passions unbridled by morality and Religion. Avarice, Ambition, Revenge or Gallantry, would break the strongest Cords of our Constitution as a Whale goes through a Net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

-Letter From John Adams to Massachusetts Militia, 11 October 1798

"Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

-George Washington's Farewell Address

Notice how the language of Adams and Washington mirrors that of Scripture. The church's role is not "political" in the sense that the church should have a branch of government that it runs, but the importance of the church in shaping the conscience of the society is indispensable, especially for our given society. Other societies have grown up with a different religious institution at their center, and so it isn't destroyed by not having the Church as its soul. However, our system was not created like this. Christianity was the soul of our system, that is why all the founders, whether they were devout Christians or not, recognized that our system could not exist without Christianity at its center. For the church to negate this role will have a catastrophic effect on our given society. And the more the church has stepped out of this role, the more the political institutions of our country are being undermined.

Historically, how did the church fulfill this role? There were numerous ways, but for the sake of brevity I will only give two, welfare and education. As stated before, the founders did not approve of the state owning the capital of our society and redistributing it as they saw fit, and so, when our country was founded there was no state welfare system. If that was the case, how were the poor and destitute provided for? It was the Church. The church functioned in that role and allowed for the resources of others to be distributed to those in need. The church as had this role since its inception:

“Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.”

-Acts 2:44-45

Some see socialism here, but it is actually the opposite. Socialism is when the state redistributes money, not when the church does this. The founders were against the state redistributing wealth for the reasons that I mentioned before, none of these reasons apply to the church however. The church can't coerce anyone to give money, they don't have an army and they can't tax. Therefore any money they receive is through donation. Also, since the church leadership is fully integrated within their given community, being the ones who dedicate infants, educated the young, presided over marriage vows, counseled and prayed for the sick and dying, and performed funerals, they were not disconnected bureaucrats.

Beyond welfare, the church was also responsible for the education of the youth:

“They do not consider their church establishment as convenient, but as essential to their state; not as a thing heterogeneous and separable; something added for accommodation; what they may either keep up or lay aside, according, to their temporary ideas of convenience. They consider it as the foundation of their whole constitution, with which, and with every part of which, it holds an indissoluble union. Church and state are ideas inseparable in their minds, and scarcely is the one ever mentioned without mentioning the other. Our education is so formed as to confirm and fix this impression. Our education is in a manner wholly in the hands of ecclesiastics, and in all stages from infancy to manhood.”

-Edmund Burke - Reflections On The Revolution In France

Notice that Burke, as a British politician, is making the same argument about the church as the founding fathers. And he states it as a given, that the church educates the young. What we have forgotten today is that education is not just intellectual, it is also moral. Those who educate the minds also educate the hearts and the souls of those under their authority. Since the church served as the conscience of the society, they were

responsible for this formation of the young. Now, the church has almost entirely ceded education to the state. As the church has abandoned the institutions of welfare and education, it is no wonder that our society is becoming exponentially secular. And as our founders warned, as the soul of the country dies, the nation itself is dying with it. This doesn't mean that the country is doomed to total destruction, just that our system can't survive without a soul, that's how it was designed. And if that soul won't be Christianity, a new religion has to take its place and reshape the institutions and the system itself to incorporate this new cultural conscience, and that is what we are seeing take place right now.

Emphasis on Human Liberty

“For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.”

-Galatians 5:13

Another key facet of Christianity is our need to be free. This is again a unique aspect of our faith. Most other faith systems focus so much on the works of the flesh, that the freedom of the conscience doesn't really matter. Meaning that in order for someone to be a part of an ancient religion, the works themselves are what did that, regardless of what someone believed internally. This is why we see in books like Daniel, the rulers coercing religious behavior. For the Christian this would be counterproductive since someone can only be a Christian through a freedom of choice, not through coercion of faith. For the pagan this was not so. Coercion was a useful tool for these pagan nations, and the sincerity of those who were forced into their faith did not matter to them. Yet in the Bible, the early church leaders say the opposite:

“Not that we have dominion over your faith, but are fellow workers for your joy; for by faith you stand.”

-2 Corinthians 1:24

The apostle Paul could have easily “pulled rank” in this letter and forced the Corinthians to obey his dictates, but instead he humbly appeals to their joy in Christ in order to encourage them towards right behavior. He does this because he understands that Christ is not pleased through simple obedience, but only through a genuine love and desire to come after Him.

This is the reason why the founders were so interested in liberty and personal accountability. They believed firmly that the only way for someone to be truly virtuous and to genuinely know God was if they were free to do so. This required them to refrain

from crafting a government that forced religion down on people. This also means that preserving things like freedom of speech in the first amendment, or the freedom of self defense in the second, was drastically important to their overall vision. In order for true virtue to be possible, many terrible things would have to be possible as well. In order for someone to be able to freely confess Jesus as Lord, you must also allow for the ability of others to profess vile and immoral things.

But this freedom was also not supposed to be limitless:

“...as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God.”

-1 Peter 2:16

Our founders did not see liberty as an end unto itself, but a means of achieving true virtue and godliness. Too much law can be a hindrance to that goal, but so can too much liberty, and so, for liberty to serve its correct purpose, it sometimes must be restrained. The problem is that today many have forgotten, or simply disagree with, this original founding vision. Because we have lost sight of what liberty is for, liberty itself is being eroded. Both through an excess of vice that is being celebrated as well as through increasingly authoritative actions restricting speech and religious expression. Unfortunately, if we can't recover this original founding vision, like the earlier point, the system itself will be destroyed over time. There is more to be said about this, but let's finish this paper by looking at the actions of God in response to our liberty.

This purpose of liberty can help us understand the way that God works in the world. Since He desires for all men to come freely to Him, He does not force men to faith, and He does not prevent acts of evil. However, God does intervene in history. It seems that in order for liberty to have its proper effect, God will sometimes act, like He did in the flood or in the tower of Babel. God will not allow human depravity to exceed a particular limit, because this would prevent the very end that liberty is supposed to achieve. Many today have the false belief that true freedom is the ability to do whatever we want. But this isn't true. When liberty is abused it actually makes us miserable and less free.

A simple example would be looking at an addict. It is by their free decision that they continue to use their drug. But the more they use, the more dependent they are on it. Eventually, the addiction grows to the point that they can no longer operate in their own free-will. They have been placed under horrible bondage and are now prevented from doing the things that would truly make them happy, like having a fulfilling marriage or career.

God intends our liberty to be an access point to a genuine loving relationship with Him:

“For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died;”

-2 Corinthians 5:21

For some, they struggle to see God this way. They see Him as an authoritative heavenly dictator that only wants obedience from them. This is not the case. We must remember that a loving relationship was so important to our God that He was willing to allow for sin and death to reign in His once perfect creation. God even allowed for the free will of man to murder His only Son. This was done so that we can be forgiven for the sin that we have freely chosen, and through that forgiveness, we can freely choose a relationship with God alone. Even though the Christian life requires discipline and self-sacrifice, these things are not done for their own sake, but for the sake of drawing nearer to our God, who is the source, and end of all freedom.

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.”

-Galatians 5:1